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Publisher Interview / Sara Miller McCune

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Publisher Interview — Sara Miller McCune

Founder, Sage Publications, Inc.

I first met Sara Miller McCune many years ago when — due to Lyman Newlin's arm-twisting — she came to her first Charleston Conference. She is a delightful woman but also a dynamic and exciting human being. Here is some of her story . . .

ATG: How did it all begin?

SMM: I was born not so long ago in New York Hospital in New York City and I lived for my first 23 years in the City. I went to public school and college there and am a graduate of Queens College, part of City University of NY.

ATG: I know that you were a New York State Regents Scholar and editor of your college yearbook, also that you worked on the school newspaper. How exactly did you get started in book publishing?

SMM: When I graduated from college, I got a job working for Macmillan, Inc. which had just merged with Crowell Collier around the same time that Crowell Collier had acquired The Free Press and moved it to New York. That was June 1961. It was quite an introduction to the world of book publishing. I had a lot of practical hands-on experience with the college yearbook and the newspaper so when I went to Career Blazers to try to find a job, they took a look at my resume and said I was meant for publishing work. Macmillan was my first interview and I got the job. I even canceled my Peace Corps interview.

ATG: What was your assignment?

SMM: It was an important time for Macmillan — post merger and shortly after **Jeremiah Kaplan** had joined Macmillan (coming along with The Free Press). I met **George McCune** who was being promoted through the ranks. Not long after, Warren Sullivan (coming from Wiley's Halsted Press) signed an agreement with Pergamon to distribute their books in the western hemisphere. I met Bob Maxwell and before long I was to work at Pergamon Press, Ltd. in Oxford.

Sullivan's interest was in getting

Macmillan into the STM [Scientific, Technical and Medical] book business and on his side Maxwell needed a big infusion of cash. It was an arrangement not without problems like anything relating to deals made by Robert Maxwell.

In a small way, I was a problem solver. I was involved in trying to explain to the Macmillan sales force ways in which an American company could sell these books whose authors' names no one could pronounce and whose titles no one could understand. My job at Macmillan

"We tried to figure out how an American company could sell these books whose authors' names no one could pronounce and whose titles no one could understand."

the first year was doing marketing analysis which was among the lowliest of the low jobs. I was a number cruncher in the days without computers, but it gave me a bird's eye opportunity to see and learn a lot about many different aspects of the publishing business. In my second year at Macmillan, I worked with 4 of the 7 sales departments at Macmillan. They were trying to absorb the marketing of the Pergamon list. It was a time of change. Any company in merger mania

is going through enormous flux. In that situation, I could take on things that my youth suggested I was not entitled to. Still, I believe that if you work hard and are eager and intelligent, you can get a lot of chances to do interesting things. I always took chances and liked to go new ways. I guess I still do.

ATG: How big was the Pergamon list then? What was the Pergamon list like compared to the Macmillan list?

SMM: Macmillan had over 4000 titles in print — 1000 plus were active in the divisions I worked with (that excluded el-hi). When Pergamon was added to the mix, it was almost Dickensian — the best of times and the worst of times. Pergamon had at least 300 active titles. They were just about to launch a new series (The Commonwealth and International Library of Science, Technology and Liberal Studies) with 1000 projected volumes, bringing out 100 in the first year. One day no one knew anything about the Pergamon titles, and the next day we had to sell all of them! That can cause a hiccup in any organization.

I started some special promotions like agency plans for technical books. I wrote the manuals for the marketing and sales plan for the Commonwealth Library series. Macmillan was launching the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Physics* and only volumes 1 and 2 were coming out immediately. No one knew when the rest were coming out. This wasn't that uncommon, but it definitely represented a big change for the publisher of *Gone With the Wind* and *Forever Amber*.

Macmillan also had a large number of elementary, high school and college textbooks. Culture shock is really the only way to describe it. The sales force was ready and willing. But there was a big difference between Macmillan and Pergamon. Macmillan had just published the bestseller *The Guns of August* (Barbara Tuchman) and had strong juvenile, religious and college textbook lists. The el-hi textbook list was being overhauled. Macmillan was also absorbing The Free Press classics in social and behavioral science. When they decided they had to get into STM, the Pergamon deal was

deemed by some as an ideal point of entry. But it was always a rocky marriage and it ended quickly.

ATG: The inevitable question. When did you first meet Robert Maxwell?

SMM: The first times I met him in New York tend to blur together. I cared deeply for the success of the Pergamon list and very much wanted Macmillan to have a success with it. I think that impressed Maxwell. You know me. I am not shy. Whenever he asked me a question, I would answer him in a forthright fashion. I think I made a positive impression on him. I went to work for him for a limited time in Oxford (work permits were always a problem)

I remember Bob best from the time that I worked in Oxford. The first Frankfurt Book Fair. Maxwell buzzing in like royalty. That was the period of his interest in politics, and he ran for Parliament and eventually became an MP. I had been active in college in the Young

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Democrats. I had worked hard to get Kennedy elected (even though I couldn't vote — it was age 21 then). Because of my political interests, I did some work on Maxwell's political campaign. It was maddening, but interesting.

What I mostly remember from that period was the enormous sense of the charisma of the man. He had an incredible way — his personality — of making an impact on authors, journalists, editors, on any rank of business person. I have a memory of someone who was an incredibly fast thinker. He could convert to different currencies in his head, switch effortlessly into different languages and was fluent in most of them. He could certainly think and calculate like lightning in at least five languages. In many ways, he was a figure larger than life.

There were times when it was very difficult to work there at Pergamon. It was still in the early and middle sixties, and Maxwell was very involved in the details of the running of the publishing company. Pergamon in the spring and summer of 1963 wasn't that big a com-

pany. Thirteen million pounds was the annual turnover then though the pound was worth a lot more and so was the dollar. Pergamon was smaller than Wiley Interscience at that time. The world is a very different place now. Maxwell traveled a lot and had a tendency to swoop down and make big changes without considering what problems they would cause for the next step in the chain. Implementation was left to the directors and sometimes it was a pretty big order to make it all work and prevent disasters.

By the time of his death, Maxwell was a different person from the one I had known. I met him a year before he died at yet another Frankfurt Book Fair. I wouldn't want to speculate about his end. There's been enough of that already.

ATG: What did you do for Pergamon?

SMM: It was a temporary appointment that became permanent. In Oxford, Maxwell fired a sales manager and dropped me in to replace him. There I was, a young American woman in charge of a sales force of British gentlemen older than I was. It was interesting, but difficult. There were 4 sales people in the UK and 4 abroad in Sydney, India and Japan. There were also sales and distribution arrangements via other subsidiary companies. Macmillan was handling the Americas. The distribution agreement between Pergamon and Macmillan fell apart in America after 2 years and Pergamon opened and then enlarged the U.S. office with **Ladislav Majthenyi** and **Laszlo Straka** as well as **Otto Rapp** and **Inge Valentine**. Until the Macmillan book distribution deal lapsed, the Journals Division was the active part of the Pergamon, Inc., operation. I guess it was a mutual disenchantment. Still, in the end, Maxwell had his large infusion of cash and Macmillan had gotten their feet wet with STM so some usable knowledge was gained all around.

ATG: You mentioned that you knew George McCune. What was happening to him while you were with Pergamon?

SMM: Maxwell tried to recruit George (later my husband) to run Pergamon, Inc., but that came to nothing. I'm not sure how serious they both really were. I had met George at Macmillan and worked for him before I went to Oxford, but we really didn't keep

in touch while I was at Pergamon.

George was one of the most creative, intelligent, and hard-working publishers I have ever known. His passing in May 1990 marked the end of a publishing career spanning four decades. In his 13 years at Macmillan, he served as Assistant Director of the College Division, Vice President and Director of Sales, Director of The Free Press, and founding President of Macmillan's junior college division, Glencoe Press. With George, I was able to build Sage into an

"But I had nothing to risk and everything to gain."

international professional publishing enterprise. At times it was hard to tell where his thoughts left off and mine began. We inspired each other in all sorts of ways. We would have ideas over the kitchen table late at night and then, because we had our own operation which we could control, we could bust our guts to bring them to fruition. George was not so focused on money. He wanted to get information into the hands of consumers. He stood out from the crowd. He was much more like Jerry Kaplan than Bob Maxwell. George had an infinite capacity for detail, and I remember him poring over Macmillan invoices by the thousands to find out what was selling and to whom. There were no computers to help him then. His was a rare gift and orientation. I think that it's unfair that I am more known than George was. For 25 years at Sage, I was Mrs. Outside and he was Mr. Inside. He was a very private person and he did not like publicity. He was low profile, no gossip. But he has left behind the McCune Foundation, which was in-

"I think there will be more evolution than revolution."

corporated in March 1990 to benefit higher education, and, of course, Sage, which continues to grow and flourish.

ATG: So, you began Sage in 1965, after only 3 1/2 years in publishing at Macmillan, Inc. in New York and at Pergamon Press, Ltd in Oxford, England. Tell us more.

SMM: I had become disenchanted with large-scale publishing houses. Both

Macmillan and Pergamon had more than a thousand employees each. Everywhere I turned during my first years in the industry, I saw examples of what *not* to do. My Dad and each of his brothers had businesses of their own, and I envied their independence while absorbing at every family gathering the notion that it was perfectly natural to be one's own boss.

George McCune had been both my boss and mentor during my last year at Macmillan. He envied my freedom to take the risk of starting my own imprint and encouraged me to do so. He was the only one. I am sure if he hadn't had financial obligations from his prior marriages, he would have started a publishing business of his own — so I suppose I represented a surrogate to him.

My parents were hoping for my marriage (preferably to a nice Jewish doctor or lawyer) and at least two grandchildren. My friends in publishing thought that — a month before my 24th birthday — I might perhaps be too young and inexperienced. But I had nothing to risk and everything to gain. So I hunted up a former college classmate who was an attorney and told him to set up a corporation. The start-up capital was \$500 (half of that from the value of a used air-conditioner we never actually sold). I had the promise of a little consulting income from three tiny publishers in New York City and also the promise of some capital contributions from George (which vanished in subsequent legal battles with his ex-wives). Sage was actually started in January, 1965, in New York City and moved to California a year and a half later.

ATG: So you had the start up capital and you had the desire, what else did you need?

SMM: Three hurdles were obvious — 1) capital; 2) good people; and 3) good manuscripts to publish. I thought the third would be the toughest, but that was actually the easiest. The people were the hardest. I was always aware that capital would be difficult. That was why we went into journals publishing as well as books. I clearly needed to publish or sell things that would bring me positive cash flow from day one. George was a behind-the-scenes brain-storming presence at that point (he was still a Vice President at Macmillan, Inc.). After considering the possibility of starting a social

science book club, the merits of starting with a journal and publishing a booklist around it quickly, took on great appeal.

On the evening I was informed that my corporate charter had been granted, I was having drinks with my former political science professor **Marilyn Gittell**. She was lamenting the fact that City University of New York had no university press and therefore she had no logical home for a journal she wanted to start called *Urban Affairs Quarterly*. Maybe it was the scotch (although I prefer to think it was fate and the recognition of an exciting potential opportunity), but I immediately offered to publish the journal, and my offer was accepted the next day. George was there, encouraging us, as was Marilyn's husband, **Irwin Gittell** (who agreed to become Sage's first accountant).

At that point I was Sage's sole employee. I had a one-room office at 150 Fifth Avenue (at the corner of 20th Street) — the birthplace of several publishing companies. I was at the north end of one of Manhattan's traditional publishing and bookselling enclaves and just south of

"Publishing is still one of the greatest and most satisfying careers in the world."

the toy district. By day I worked at least 3 days a week at other publishing clients' offices and by night and every other spare minute I could find at Sage's office, I did the copy editing and proof-reading, watched the typesetting forms being locked up, and smelled the ink as the first issue of *UAQ* rolled off the letterpress in September 1965. Just like producing a baby, it took 9 months to "birth" Sage's first journal.

ATG: Where did the name Sage come from?

SMM: The name Sage Publications was dreamed up as the result of a brainstorming session between me and George McCune in New York City. I was looking for synonyms for scholar (like the ancient sages of biblical times) and George was playing anagrams. He came up with SA from Sara and GE from George. Since it was the only name on BOTH lists, consensus was easily reached (especially since I am slightly superstitious, I declared that this was

clearly a sign from God, or the gods, depending on your religious beliefs). One of our Vice Presidents, Judith Rothman, now tells authors Sage stands for "Sara And George Enterprises." I like that very much.

ATG: So, what is Sage like now, nearly thirty years later? You are located in Thousand Oaks, California, you have offices in London, England and New Delhi, India, you have a staff of nearly 200 in the United States, the United Kingdom and India combined, you publish 130 journals and 300 books a year, you are a leading international educational and professional publisher of books, journals, newsletters, and related materials. How did all of this happen?

SMM: Sage remains one of the few privately owned companies in the publishing world, characterized by a long-term commitment to the future. To us that has always meant both growth and change. We are dedicated to the widespread dissemination of information at reasonable prices. In recent years, we have been actively engaged in strengthening and broadening our journal and book publishing operations — under the able leadership of **Nancy Hammerman** (Director of Sage Periodicals Press) and **Judith Rothman** (Director of Sage, Inc.'s Book Division). Both are Vice Presidents, based in California. We are also moving beyond the social sciences. For example, we have been publishing in such fields as management and nursing research for several years now.

More recently, we have also launched several affiliated companies, in addition to our international affiliates in London and New Delhi. These spin-offs now include: Corwin Press, created to serve professionals in the field of education (under the direction of **Gracia Alkema**, previously with Jossey-Bass, Inc.); Pine Forge Press, publishers of books and software designed for undergraduate course use (founded and led by **Steve Rutter**, a Wadsworth veteran); and Baskerville Communications Corporation which was just launched this year by **Tim Baskerville** (a talented and visionary newsletter entrepreneur) to develop business-to-business information resources.

We are also looking for other opportunities to expand and grow by developing other start-ups, as well as through acquisitions of lists, divisions or even smaller companies. And we are care-

fully experimenting with new media (including CD-ROMs, software and videos). We also recently started selectively publishing International Student Editions in collaboration with Toppan (Singapore). This is an exciting time for us!

ATG: You mentioned that you are one of the few independent publishers still left. Are you really never tempted to cave in to the merger mania that you experienced at Macmillan?

SMM: NEVER. And the passion for independence as well as a desire to grow and change is a philosophy that I share with Sage's current President and CEO, **David F. McCune** (George's oldest son). David is a technology expert and long-time journalist and he has often been at the forefront of new technologies. In addition to his position as editor on one of the world's first large-scale electronic news delivery projects at Time, Inc., he pioneered home banking software for several banks during his leadership at a software development company. He began his career at Sage as Director of

"You can't start a business on today's problems; you must anticipate tomorrow's problems."

Marketing and Director of Production. His vision of further growth for Sage involves his continued dedication to uniting technology and publishing to ensure quality and to better serve its markets.

ATG: What do you think of all of the changes that are taking place in the publishing environment right now? Will publishing become the domain of the government, NREN or of some other big network? What do you think publishing will be like in 10 or 20 years?

SMM: I believe that the pace of implementation of change will be slower than most people think. There are a lot of problems to be solved that people aren't addressing. Who pays for the dissemination of information among the resource poor, for example? Maybe with medical and scientific literature, this problem can be solved more easily than it can in the humanities or social sciences because there is more money to throw at the problem. I think there will be more evolution than revolution. The gee-whiz kids will get disappointed as 5

years stretch to 15 or 20. Like the introduction of the phone or the fax machine, there have been and continue to be enormous changes in how information is disseminated. Certainly more is possible than I ever dreamt was possible when I got into the business. But who is going to pay? For what? By when? We need answers to all of these questions.

Government can't be the sole source of funding in today's society. There are other problems and priorities that society must face. I suspect that there will have to be a lot of players contributing to the equation including the corporate sector and the nonprofits. There may be a different configuration of how universities, students and faculty get and pay for what they want. There is an enormous amount of money spent on the dissemination of information and it will be different years from now, the inevitable ripple effect.

The real issue is how intelligently we can utilize available resources and reallocate them, how creative we can be. We need the most bang for the bucks currently spent on information dissemination and retrieval. The "information industry" (frankly I don't always like this pompous, undefined terminology) as a sector has a lot of money coming to it. How this money is utilized is key. There will be many a shakeout in the years ahead.

Publishing is a people intensive business. We need good people and I am concerned about the people we are bringing into the industry now and those we can attract in the future. It is even tougher to get the kind of people we need to face and resolve the challenges in this time of rapid technological change. It is harder and harder to get the people with a genuine passion for publishing. Things have changed in this regard when you consider the mid-sixties (or even the seventies) versus now. The recruitment and training of good people is our biggest challenge for the future. I think the library profession has a parallel problem. Pay is a critical component.

ATG: Would you start Sage now, in this publishing environment?

SMM: I might answer the question differently depending on what you mean by the current publishing environment.

In terms of starting a social sciences press right now, I don't know if I would. The key is to find a niche not well-served and try to do a better job. Social science

is probably not underserved now. There are other more underserved areas. And I believe that even those starting "conventional" publishing houses today should concentrate on developing innovative products — especially those with potential value in the new media environments to come. You can't start a business on today's problems; you must anticipate tomorrow's problems.

If you are talking more generally about starting a publishing company from scratch, I guess I would say that if an individual is willing to work hard for a long time and wants independence, publishing is still a great business. You meet great people — other publishers, librarians, authors, university administrators. There is no way to hang out with a better crowd of people. The entry costs are much higher now than they used to be and the start-up capital required is higher. Still, when I think back to Jerry Kaplan forming The Free Press, or to Sage's start-up, or to **Larry Erlbaum's** launch of LEA, it seems as though there are probably ways to pull it off even with today's high entry costs. Publishing is still one of the greatest and most satisfying careers in the world.

The End.

If any of you are archivists out there, the June 1989 Against the Grain (v.1#2!!) had the very first publisher profile we ever did and it was of Sage Publications! — Yr. Ed. ☺

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